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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR LIMITING ACCESS TO NETWORK ELEMENTS**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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(51) Int. Cl.⁷ **G06F 1/24**

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(58) Field of Search **380/283; 713/168, 713/170, 171, 182**

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23 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets

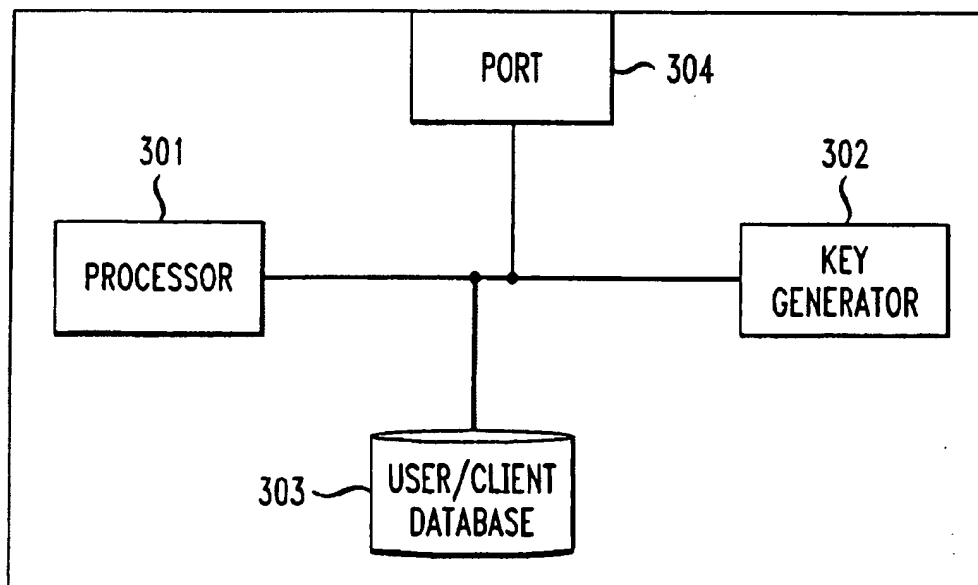


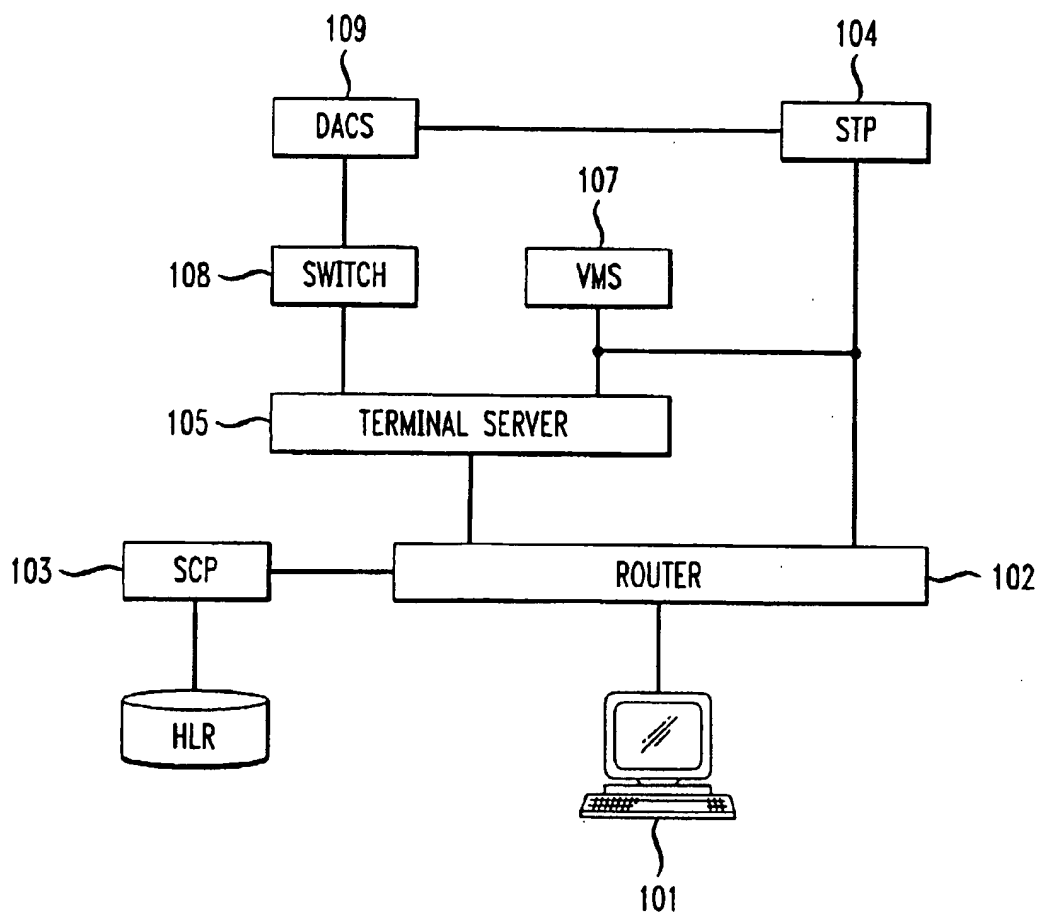
FIG. 1

FIG. 2

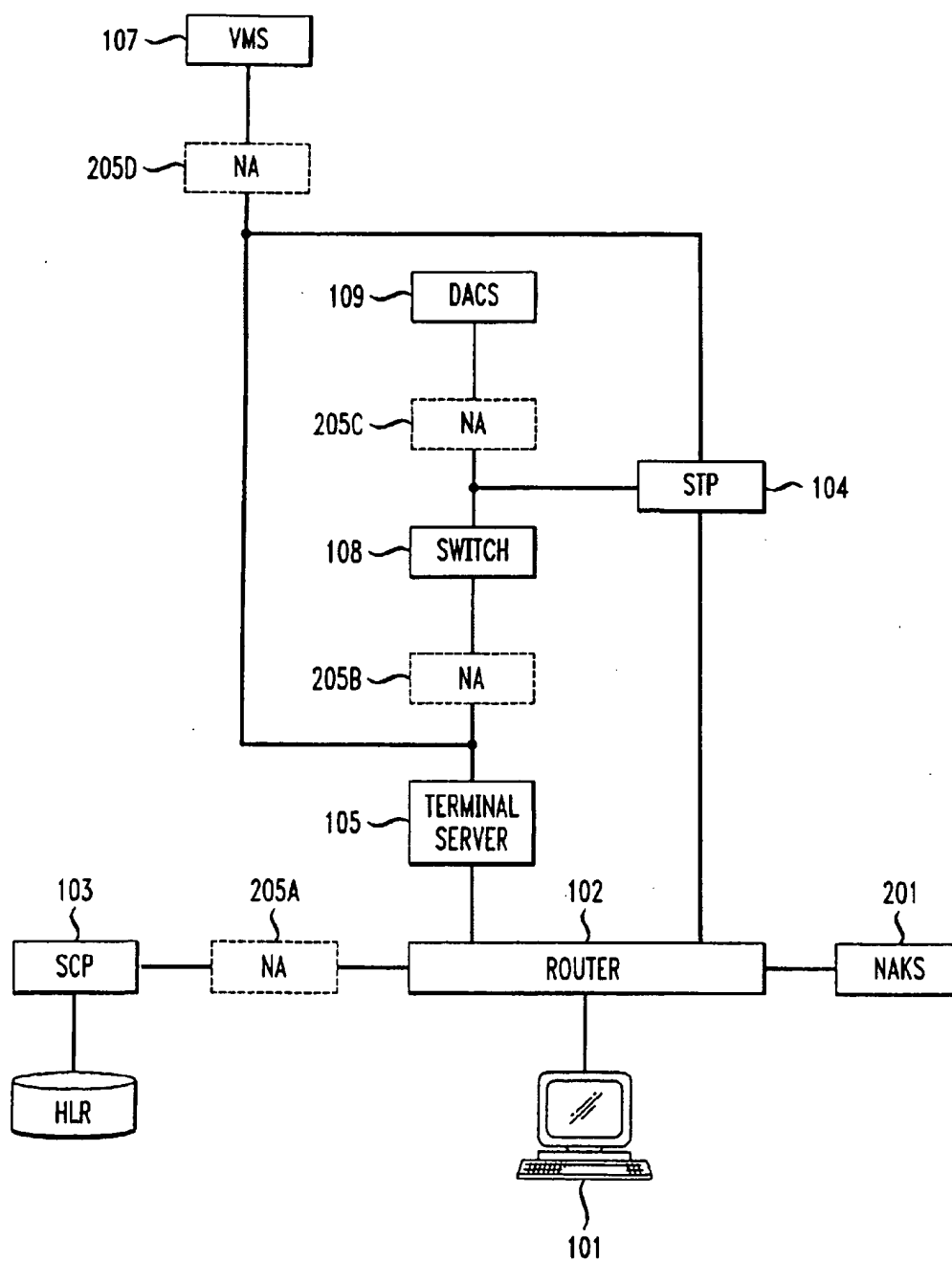
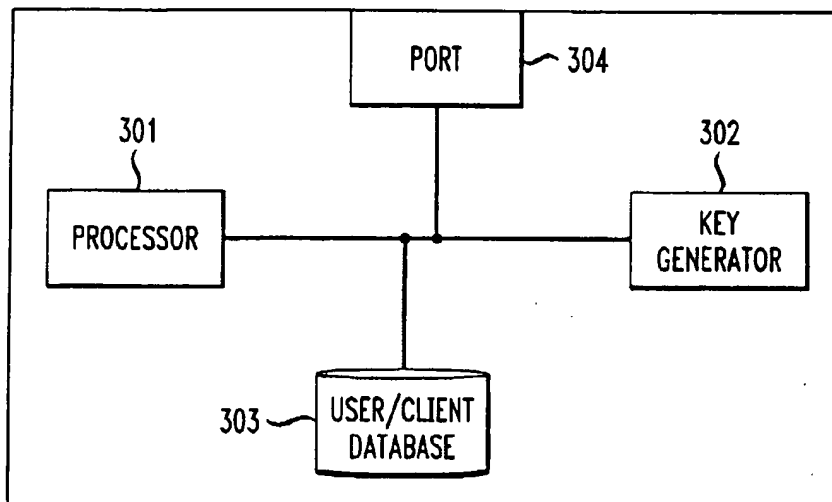
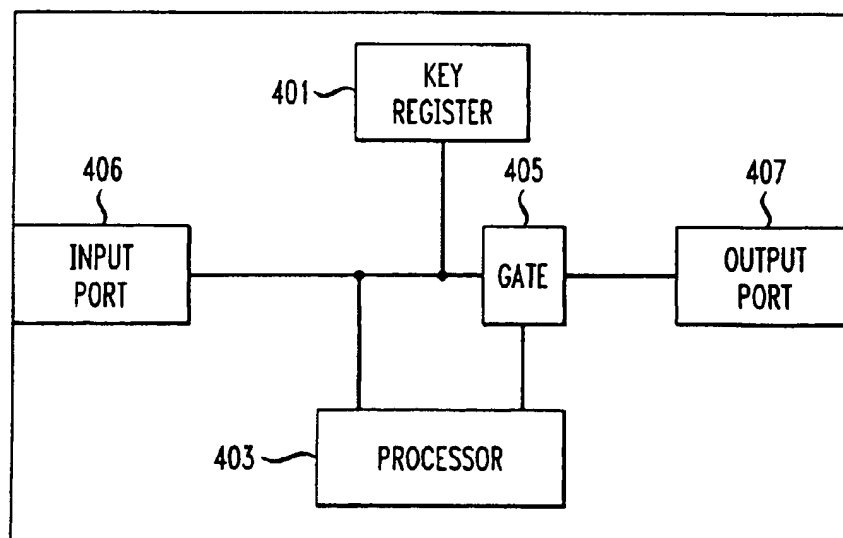


FIG. 3*FIG. 4*

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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR LIMITING ACCESS TO NETWORK ELEMENTS

This application is a continuation of Ser. No. 09/135,086, filed Aug. 17, 1998, now U.S. Pat. No. 6,256,735.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to a method and apparatus for limiting access to network elements. More particularly, the present invention is directed to a method and apparatus for limiting access to network elements having disparate operating systems to only those users being authorized to access the respective elements.

Various communication network configurations are known in the art. Typically such communication network configurations include a plurality of different network elements. The network elements can be supplied by various vendors and therefore implement different types of interfaces. Similarly, the different types of network elements, which may be intelligent devices that include some processing capabilities, operate with different operating systems, for example different versions of Unix or DOS or Windows.

One example of an arrangement of network elements is illustrated in FIG. 1. In this particular arrangement a user may have access to various network elements via personal computer (PC) 101. The PC may be coupled to a router 102 via a wide area network (WAN) or local area network (LAN) connection. It would be possible to use TCP/IP transport protocols for initiating communications from the PC. The router can be coupled to different network elements such as a signal control point (SCP) 103, a signal transfer point (STP) 104 and a terminal server 105 which constitutes an additional intelligent device that interfaces to yet additional network elements. Examples of such additional network elements include a voice mail server (VMS) 107, a switch 108 which could be a Lucent Technologies 5ESS switch, and a Signal Access Cross Connect System (DACS) 109. It should be understood that this is merely an example of an arrangement of network elements and is not the sole representation of a configuration in which problems arise that can be addressed by the present invention.

In such network configurations employing a plurality of different network elements, it is difficult to provide a unified solution for limiting access by the user to each and every one of a plurality of the network elements. The problem arises because the different network elements operate with different operating systems and, as indicated before may be supplied by different vendors with different communication specifications. Therefore, typically each individual network element would have to operate some sort of authentication process to determine whether an individual user has access to that particular element. This requires different implementations of authentication processes depending upon the design of the respective network elements.

Another network where this problem arises is in a wireless cellular network where access is needed to a variety of network elements. Again, since the various network elements may have different operating systems with different degrees of authentication capability, it can be difficult to implement a universal solution that will force authentications.

It would be beneficial to have an arrangement by which access could be limited to the disparate network elements using a unified solution that is independent of the operating systems of the respective elements.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with an embodiment of the present invention, access to network elements is limited such that

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one authentication arrangement can service a plurality of network elements. In one specific embodiment, a network authentication key server generates a key of a predetermined length and transmits it to various network authentication nodes, each node being associated with at least one network element. When a user requests access to a given network element, the network authentication key server can detect whether the user is authorized to access the requested network element. If the user is permitted to access the element, then the server can modify the user's request to include the most current network authentication key. The modified request is then forwarded to the network element in question. A network authentication node associated with the requested network element intercepts the modified request and examines it. If the network authentication node determines that the modified request reflects the most current key that the node has received from the key server, then access to the network element is granted. If the authentication node determines that the request does not reflect the appropriate authentication key, then access will be denied. The network authentication nodes can therefore act as gates to the network elements which may be traversed only after a user has been authenticated by the network authentication key server.

In accordance with this arrangement, the network authentication node can operate in a mode that is transparent to both the user and to the network elements. In one embodiment of the invention, the network authentication key server includes a database which is examined to determine which network elements, if any, a given user is permitted to access.

Further advantages and details regarding the present invention will be described below.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates an example of a communication network arrangement which is known.

FIG. 2 illustrates an example of a communication network such as that shown in FIG. 1, modified to include an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 3 provides a block diagram of one example of an embodiment of a network authentication key server of FIG. 2.

FIG. 4 is a block diagram that illustrates one example of an embodiment of a network authentication node illustrated in FIG. 2.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In accordance with the present invention, authentication techniques are provided in a communication network so as to limit user access to individual network elements which may have disparate operating systems or may be supplied by different vendors. An example of a system employing an embodiment of the present invention is illustrated in FIG. 2. In regard to its network elements, FIG. 2 is very similar to FIG. 1. In fact, like elements in the two figures bear like reference numerals. The new elements in FIG. 2—namely the authentication key server 201 and the network authenticator nodes (NA) 205A, 205B, 205C and 205D—are the elements that provide the access limitation sought in the present invention. (These elements are also referred to herein as “authenticating” and “authenticator” key servers or nodes.) More specifically, the network authenticating key server (NAKS) 201 generates a key. This key can be a multi-bit key, for example 128 bits. In addition, the key can be periodically generated so that a new key is produced at

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specified time intervals. These are examples of techniques for providing an authentication key and other techniques may be employed. What is significant is that there is some authentication code generated by a server and transmitted to various network authentication nodes for subsequent use by those nodes in deciding whether to allow or deny access to an associated network element.

In regard to the network authentication nodes, it is shown in the figure that each network authentication node is associated with a network element. For example, network authentication node 205A is associated with network element SCP103. Similarly, network authenticating node 205B is associated with a switch 108. These network authenticator nodes are shown in dashed lines to represent that they are substantially transparent to the rest of the network and to the user. In operation, the network authenticating nodes receive a current key generated by the network authenticating key server. This key is then held by the authenticating node. In a sample embodiment of such a node as shown in FIG. 4, the key can be maintained in a key register, 401. The key could be maintained alternatively in some other device capable of storing the key for at least as long as it takes for a new key to be generated. The network authenticating node may also include a processor 403 and a gate 405 interposed between ports 406 and 407. Operation of the network authenticator node will be described with reference to these elements; however it should be noted that alternative configurations can be provided for the network authenticator which will also provide the functionality of storing a key and then comparing the stored key against a user key.

An example of the network authenticating key server is illustrated in FIG. 3. In this example the server includes a processor 301, a key generator 302, a subscriber database 303 and a port 304. All of the elements are connected to one another via some sort of internal bus architecture. The key generator could be a pseudo-random number generator or any type of key generator known in the art. The processor can assure that keys are periodically transmitted from the key server to the various network authenticating nodes as required by the implementation selected. The subscriber database can be used by the processor so as to determine access privileges of a given user as will be described below.

In operation, once the server has transmitted a key to the various network authentication nodes, it awaits receipt of a user's access request with regard to a given network element. For example, suppose that the user of device 101 seeks access to the voice mail server, VMS 107. The user's request is detected by the network authenticating key server. The authenticating key server either asks for or simply receives information identifying the user. Such information could be constituted by some sort of user id/user password combination. Alternatively, user identification information could be constituted by such things as a calling party telephone number identified by ANI (Automatic Numbering Information). The specific identification information is not critical. What is important is that the server be able to identify the user with reasonable accuracy. Once the user is identified, the server can then examine the subscriber database and determine whether the identified user is authorized to access the network element to which the user's request is directed. If the network authenticating key server detects that the user does not have authorization to access the network element, then the request can be discarded or dropped. If, however, the network authenticating key server determines that the user is authorized to access the network element, then the server can modify the request so as to somehow reflect the current key information which has already been passed on to the various network authenticating nodes.

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In one embodiment of the present invention, the request can be modified to incorporate the actual generated key in either a header or a trailer of the request. Then, when a network authenticating node associated with the requested network element intercepts the request, it can easily strip away the appended key and determine whether that key matches the current key maintained by the network authenticating node. If the keys match, then the node can pass the request through to the network element. In the embodiment of FIG. 4, this would mean that the processor 403, upon detecting that a received request contains a key corresponding to that which is stored in the key register 401, can control the gate 405 to allow the network request to be passed from an input port 406 to an output port 407 and thus on to the network element. The network authenticator is transparent to the user. If the authenticating node does not detect the current key in the user's request, then the request can be dropped by the node and thus never passed through to the requested network element.

Not only is the authenticating node transparent to the user, but the key itself is transparent to the user. The user never receives a copy of the key which is used to allow access to a network element. Instead, the user at best maintains the identification information necessary to represent who the user is and then the network authenticating key server and network authenticating node operate together so as to control access to the requested network element.

In one embodiment of the present invention, the solution of providing this authorization process is hardware-based and operates between a physical and datalink layer of the OSI model. The server can be a general purpose UNIX computer that holds a repository of user identifiers and passwords, along with profiles that specify the network elements which various end users are allowed to access. The authenticator node can be a "black box" that has its own specialized operating system compatible with the server. The node can communicate directly with the server. In addition, in one of the embodiments the key is inserted into the header of the TCP/IP message which constitutes the request for the network element. The key can be changed periodically so that it is possible that a given user will attempt to access the same network element at different times and the server will use different keys at those different times for purposes of permitting access to the network element. In such a circumstance, the user is not ever aware that different keys have been used to authorize the access.

The present invention thus provides flexibility for controlling access to network elements that may be supplied by different vendors and/or may have different operating systems which make providing a unified solution to access control difficult. The solution proposed by the present invention provides equipment that is essentially transparent to the user and avoids placing the access control keys in the hands or control of the user during the authorization process.

While this invention has been described with specific embodiments thereof, it is evident that many alternatives, modifications, and variations will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Accordingly, the preferred embodiments of the invention as set forth herein are intended to be illustrative, not limiting. Various changes may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for authenticating access to a network element, comprising:

periodically transmitting a key to a plurality of network authenticator nodes; and

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in response to a request to access the network element, if the user is authorized to access the network element, transmitting the request to one of the network authenticator nodes along with a current key.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein said network element is a signal control point.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein said network element is a signal transfer point.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein said network element is a terminal server.

5. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
identifying the user; and
examining a subscriber database to determine whether the identified user is authorized to access the network element.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein said identifying comprises receiving a user identifier and password combination.

7. The method of claim 5, wherein said identifying comprises receiving a user telephone number.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein said modifying comprises inserting the key into a TCP/IP header for the request.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein said modifying comprises appending the key to the request.

10. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
periodically changing the key to create a different key; and
periodically transmitting the different key to the plurality of network authenticator nodes.

11. An apparatus for authenticating access to a network element, comprising:
a key generator;
a subscriber database; and
a processor coupled to the key generator and the subscriber database, the processor being adaptively configured to:
transmit a key generated by the key generator to a plurality of network authenticator nodes,
in response to a user request for access, examine the subscriber database to determine whether the user is authorized for the requested access, and
transmit the request along with the key.

12. The apparatus of claim 11, wherein said key generator comprises a pseudo-random number generator.

13. The apparatus of claim 11, wherein said key generated by the key generator comprises a periodically changing key.

14. A computer-readable medium having stored thereon instructions for authenticating access to a network element, the instructions, when executed by a processor, causing the processor to:
periodically transmit a key to a plurality of network authenticator nodes; and
in response to a request to access the network element, if the user is authorized to access the network element,

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transmit the request to one of the network authenticator nodes along with a current key.

15. The computer-readable medium of claim 14, having stored thereon instructions that, when executed by the processor, further cause the processor to:

identify the user; and

examine a subscriber database to determine whether the identified user is authorized to access the network element.

16. The computer-readable medium of claim 14, having stored thereon instructions that, when executed by the processor, further cause the processor to insert the key into a TCP/IP header for the request.

17. The computer-readable medium of claim 14, having stored thereon instructions that, when executed by the processor, further cause the processor to append the key to the request.

18. A method of granting access to a network element, comprising, at a network authenticator node:

intercepting a user request addressed to the network element,

comparing a key from the user request to a key previously received at the network authenticator node, and

if the keys agree, passing the user request to the network element.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the intercepted user request is transmitted from a key server.

20. The method of claim 18, further comprising periodically receiving keys from a key server, wherein the comparing compares the key from the user request against a most recently received key from the key server.

21. The method of claim 18, wherein operation of the method is transparent to the network element.

22. The method of claim 18, further comprising, if the keys do not agree, preventing the network element from receiving the user request.

23. A method for authenticating access to a network element, comprising:

at a key server:

periodically transmitting a key to a plurality of network authenticator nodes, and

in response to a request to access the network element, if the user is authorized to access the network element, transmitting the request a network element along with a most current key;

at a network authenticator node:

intercepting a user request addressed to the network element,

comparing a key from the user request to a key previously received at the network authenticator node, and

if the keys agree, passing the user request to the network element.

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